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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an inclusion program at the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD), located on the Navajo Reservation in northeastern Arizona. KUSD is a rural school district with approximately 2,800 students enrolled in 4 schools (primary, intermediate, middle, and high schools). Virtually all students are Navajo, with 88 percent of students specifying Navajo as their home language. Disabled students represent 6-9 percent of each school's population. In 1991 KUSD abandoned the pull-out program for special needs students in favor of an inclusion model where regular classroom teachers assume instructional responsibility for all students. Special educators or support facilitators help classroom teachers develop appropriate goals and objectives; modify the regular curriculum; work with students in individual and small-group arrangements; team teach; and carry out other responsibilities involved with coordinating services. Also available are school liaisons who make home visits, paraprofessionals who function as individual aides to students, and specialists in areas such as physical therapy and speech therapy. An outcome of the inclusion program has been a dramatic increase in the number of objectives written for each student on the Individual Education Plan. In addition, a survey of students from Northern Arizona University completing their special education practicum experience in KUSD classrooms and district staff reveals overwhelming support of full inclusion. Respondents emphasize noticeable increases in student self-esteem and social acceptance, and improvement in student behavior. (LP)

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A DESCRIPTION OF AN INCLUSION MODEL THAT IS WORKING IN A RURAL AREA

Inclusion as a philosophy of education and as a model of service delivery to students with special needs has been gaining momentum throughout the past decade. Despite continuing controversy and debate, the pendulum is swinging away from pull-out and self-contained programs toward inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. While educators continue to debate the pros and cons of inclusion, lessons can be learned from inclusive programs already in practice. As participants in a school-based special education teacher training program in a district with full inclusion, we offer a description of an inclusion model that is working.

Description of the District

The Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) is located on the Navajo Reservation in the northeastern section of Arizona. The setting is rural and remote, with colorful sand dunes, valleys, mesas, and plateaus more in evidence than people. Kayenta lies almost equidistant from the nearest urban centers of Flagstaff, Arizona and Farmington, New Mexico, each about 150 miles away.

Approximately 2800 students from an area of 3,000 square miles are enrolled in the four schools which serve the district, all located in the town of Kayenta. There is a primary (preschool-2nd grade), intermediate (3rd-5th), middle (6th-8th) and high (9th-12th) school. District buses travel over 2,000 miles per day transporting students to and from school. Approximately eighty percent of the students ride the bus to school each day. Given the geographic size of the district, the rural style of Navajo life with long distances between homesteads, and the paucity of paved roads rendering access difficult during winter snow and spring mud, a student's bus ride may consume up to three hours per day. Ninety five to ninety seven percent of the students are Navajo, with eighty eight percent specifying Navajo as their home language. Two hundred and five of the 2800 students are identified with disabilities, representing 6-9% of each school's student population.

Breakdown by disability is consistent with expected rates of prevalence. Learning disabilities account for approximately 63% of students identified with special needs. Mental retardation accounts for about 8% and multiple disabilities for 7%. Approximately 2% fall into each of the categories of emotional disability, hearing

impairment, and visual impairment. Additionally, one or two students are identified with autism, orthopedic, or other health impairment.

District Rationale for Inclusion

Failure of the district special education resource programs to improve academic achievement led KUSD in 1991 to abandon the pull-out program in favor of an inclusion model. According to the special education director at the time inclusion began in the system, "of over one hundred students who had been enrolled in our special education resource programs for five years or longer, not one student demonstrated expected academic growth" (Bissmeyer, 1991).

Definition of Inclusion

The district adopted a philosophy of inclusion whereby special education students are educated within the regular classroom. Classroom teachers assume responsibility for the education of all students, with the support of those trained in special education.

Inclusion is defined by the district in its philosophy statement:

The concept of inclusion means all children can learn and should be given the opportunity to learn in the same environment, regardless of their special or individual needs. The self-esteem and learning of all students is best enhanced by normalizing their educational experiences under one unified system. This is best accomplished in the regular classrooms with the support of specialist, training, and time to implement a differentiated curriculum.

The inclusion partnership empowers classroom teachers and specialist(s) to better meet the needs for the learning of all children in their classes. The concept and philosophy of inclusion will be continually disseminated to administrators, teachers, support staff, parent and community members. Administrators, teachers, and support staff will be provided necessary skills and resources to implement inclusion district-wide K-12 (Bissmeyer, 1991).

The Inclusion Model-Support Facilitators

Special educators at KUSD have the title of support facilitator, for their primary responsibility is to assist regular classroom teachers and families regarding provision of services to students with special needs. A team of three support facilitators is assigned to each of the primary, intermediate, and middle schools. Four support facilitators serve the high school.

Support facilitators meet on a regular basis with the classroom teachers whom they are assigned to assist. They help classroom teachers develop appropriate Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives and make sure that these goals and objectives are being addressed. Should the classroom teacher need help modifying the regular curriculum, the support facilitator is called upon to offer ideas, information, and resource materials. The support facilitator also spends time in

the classroom working with both labeled and nonlabeled students in individual and small-group arrangements or as a team teacher. Other important responsibilities include assessing students, writing semester progress reports, attending multidisciplinary team meetings, coordinating related services, meeting with parents, and completing required special education paperwork.

Support extends to the family as well. In an area where families may be without a telephone and means of transportation and where public transportation is for the most part nonexistent, the school must make the effort to contact the family. Each school has a home liaison, bilingual in Navajo and English, who travels the extended network of dirt roads crisscrossing the reservation in an effort to make home visits. The support facilitator may accompany the liaison to help explain a referral for special education, documents requiring a parent signature, the IEP process, parent rights and responsibilities, procedural safeguards, or other related matters.

Paraprofessionals

Students who because of their disabilities need additional assistance for successful integration into the regular classroom may be assigned paraprofessionals who function as individual aides. Responsibilities depend upon the individual needs of the students. They range from toilet training and specialized feeding at the primary school to assisting with note taking in high school academic classes or providing training in vocational or independent living skills. Paraprofessionals are supervised by the support facilitators with additional training provided by related service providers.

Related Service Providers

KUSD is able to provide certain related services with district specialists. Full-time services are provided by a teacher of the visually impaired, a teacher of the hearing impaired, a physical therapist, and five speech therapists. Additional related services are contracted on a part-time basis and include an audiologist, an occupational therapist, and a teacher of orientation and mobility. Due to its remote setting, the district relies upon off-reservation consortium and state school specialists offering contract services. These services are coordinated by the support facilitators in each of the four district schools.

Site-Based Variations

Each school utilizes site-based management with some variation in how inclusion is implemented. Differences in age groups served, student characteristics, curriculum offerings, educational approaches of administrators and instructional staff dictate alterations in program implementation. At the primary school, emphasis is placed upon developing acceptance of individual differences. The support facilitators and the counselor work with individual classrooms to promote social acceptance of students with classroom needs. A "circle of friends" involving all members of the classroom is encouraged. Students receive training in social skills geared toward developing appropriate classroom and school behaviors among all students. Cooperative learning with nonlabeled students helping labeled students is built into the daily classroom routine.

When it comes to developing relationships and making friends, an additional factor plays a role in rural communities such as those in the KUSD. With long bus rides

experienced daily by many students, the interactions between students on buses form the basis of friendships. By riding the bus together and working side by side in the same classrooms, students with and without disabilities are able to get to know each other and to build upon common experiences. This is an important, although perhaps overlooked, factor in inclusion.

The "Circle of Friends" empathy training program is also utilized at the intermediate school to promote acceptance in special situations. That and the McGill Action Plan for Students (MAPS) are considered excellent tools at KUSD for integrating students with more severe handicapping conditions into the regular classroom community. Through such educational approaches as cooperative learning, peer-tutoring, and self-pacing of instruction, individual needs of all students in the inclusive setting are addressed.

By the time students reach middle school, the focus shifts to individual learning and blending into the regular education program to the extent possible. Students at this age group appear to be extremely sensitive to any singling out for special help. Support facilitators work hard to provide services in a way which doesn't draw attention to the students with identified disabilities. Another difference at the middle school level is the need for support facilitators to counsel and to discipline students. There is also the need to interface with a variety of community agencies including social services, judicial courts, police department, and Indian Health Service.

Only in high school are students with more involved special needs grouped for part of the day for vocational and independent living skill training. Two of the support facilitators at the high school level concentrate on community based instruction and vocational development with those students in need of more specialized services. The other two support facilitators concentrate on assisting students with learning disabilities in the general education program. Public relations is a major part of the job. Subject area teachers often require a lot of encouragement to be willing to work with special needs students in their classes.

Documentation of the IEP Progress

Each year the district documents the number of IEP objectives written and met. It is instructive to compare the three years prior to implementation of the inclusion model with the first three years following implementation.

One significant change is that the number of objectives written increased dramatically during the period of full inclusion. Preceding inclusion, a total average of 787 objectives representing approximately 4.5 objectives per identified student were written. Following implementation of inclusion, the total average of objectives written rose to 1815, representing approximately 9.4 objectives per student. This change represents more than a doubling of objectives written per student.

Possible reasons for the increase are worth considering. Changing state guidelines for writing IEPs may account for the difference. Support facilitators are now required to write transitional objectives as well as more objectives per goal at KUSD (three instead of two). For students with more severe disabilities, objectives across a broader range of functional/independent living skills are being developed. Perhaps these

changes relate at least in part to implementation of full inclusion. With classroom teachers addressing academic/cognitive goals and objectives through the regular curriculum, perhaps more emphasis is placed on programming in the affective and functional skill domains.

The number of objectives met per student did not change significantly. An average of 3.1 objectives per student were met before inclusion as compared to 3.2 objectives after inclusion. These figures represent a drop in the overall percentage of written objectives met from 69% to 34%. The constant rate of objectives completion pre- and post-inclusion paired with the doubling of objectives written accounts for this change. What could appear to be lowered achievement is actually consistent performance.

Survey of District Staff

As part of the practicum experience in the Rural Special Education Project, NAU students work in KUSD classrooms from 4-6 hours daily. This provides direct experience with inclusive practices as well as the opportunity to learn from staff members their views on inclusion. We also interviewed and/or obtained written responses to surveys regarding inclusion at KUSD from district administrators, support facilitators, and classroom teachers. Following is a summary of responses from staff which address how inclusion is viewed to be working at KUSD.

The overwhelming response from administrators and support facilitators is favorable of full inclusion. Respondents emphasize the noticeable increasing self-esteem and social acceptance. Primary and intermediate school staff comment on the joy of encountering students clamoring to have a turn to help guide a student in a wheelchair or to catch a ride in the hall. They also acknowledge the growing acceptance and confidence demonstrated by some classroom teachers who initially balked at including a special needs student in their classroom only to become pleased and enthusiastic once they gave it a try.

Respondents at the middle and high school also note the increase in self esteem of many students with special needs and their social-emotional growth. They report dramatic improvement in the behaviors of these students who now seem to conform to comportment standards displayed by their peers. In some cases, gains in self-esteem and adaptive behaviors are reportedly linked to students switching to milder disability categories (mild mental retardation to learning disabilities) or out of special education altogether.

A common response concerns the classroom environment created by the teacher. In classrooms where teachers model acceptance and respect for all students and attempt to foster friendships through peer tutoring, cooperative learning and group activities, inclusion is reported to meet with greater success.

Respondents make clear, however, that not all students with disabilities are accepted. Those with more noticeable disabilities and those with emotional and behavioral problems may be excluded more by their classmates despite inclusionary practices. At the middle and high school levels, classroom teachers also point out the difficulty of meeting the range of needs in the inclusive setting. They comment both on the

growing class size in the district which makes full inclusion into the classroom more difficult and on the need for classroom aides and additional training.

The bottom line, however, seems to be that inclusion is working and is worthwhile. District staff acknowledge the need to improve the system; but, it's improvement of inclusive practices which is required and desired. They are not asking for a return to segregation but for an improved unified education system which addresses the individual and unique needs of all students.

In the end, perhaps it's the classroom students themselves from whom we'll learn the most. Those students in kindergarten when full inclusion began in the district are now in their final year at the intermediate school. Whether it's their age or their experience, they are the ones for whom most agree that inclusion is working the best. They are the ones we need to be watching. We just may be witnessing a generation of students for whom full inclusion of all individuals in the classroom as well as in society at large is as easy and as basic as the ABCs.

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